



Positive language can trick your brain into a happier mindset and sway others to feel more motivated.

THE LANGUAGE OF OPTIMISM

Choosing words and phrases that connote positivity can manifest success, reduce conflict—and even transform your brain chemistry.

// BY HALLIE LEVINE //

Let's face it, words matter. You may not think too much about what you say, but the language you use conveys information about yourself to others. "We have a biological tendency to focus on the negative as a built-in survival mechanism," explains Jason Selk, PhD, a performance coach in St. Louis who has worked with the St. Louis Cardinals as well as countless Fortune 500 companies. Oftentimes, our words reflect that, he notes, whether it's what we say to others or our own thoughts running through our heads. But it's counterproductive. "Thousands of years ago, negative self-talk might have kept you on alert enough to

escape lions, but in today's world, it just causes negative emotions like stress, anxiety and even anger," he explains. This in turn causes others to doubt you, and decreases your own self-confidence, as well. The result? Self-sabotage in the making.

But you can turn this around with a few simple word tweaks. In fact, most languages are naturally optimistic, according to a 2015 University of Vermont study. When researchers examined the 10,000 most frequently used words in 10 languages, including English, Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Russian and Arabic, they found that far more fell into the optimistic category (pleasure, comedy, love) than the pessimistic

one. This also makes sense, notes Selk, as all these languages developed in societies that succeeded. "They were able to communicate with each other in a positive way, that created positive results," he says.

It's important to use optimistic language not only when speaking to others, but in your own internal thoughts as well. "This is something known as confirmation bias, where we tend to seek out and interpret information that supports our prior beliefs and values," says Jneé Hill, LCSW, a psychotherapist at Clarity Therapy in New York City. If you train yourself to see red items around you, for example, you'll notice all things red—a fire hydrant, a stop

sign, a red storefront—as you go out and about your everyday activities. Likewise, if you constantly tell yourself you'll never achieve your goals, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: "You'll seek out and find evidence supporting this belief," explains Hill.

HOW LANGUAGE CHANGES YOUR BRAIN CHEMISTRY

Both positive and negative language change your brain chemistry significantly, but in different ways. "Positive language fortifies the frontal lobes of the brain and improves its cognitive abilities," explains Amelia Alvin, PhD, a psychologist at the Mango Clinic in Miami. "It also drives the motivational centers of the brain and convert them into positive actions."

On the other hand, negative language disturbs the neurochemicals

of the brain that protect you against stress. A German study published in the medical journal *Pain*, for example, had patients undergo brain imaging and found that when they were exposed to negative or painful words their brains released more stress hormones, such as cortisol, that increased anxiety. Other research has found increased levels of anxiety even among children who practice negative self-talk. "Even a single negative word releases stress hormones that can hinder your brain function," says Alvin. Likewise, angry words affect the parts of the brain associated with logical reasoning, she adds. This can make you more impulsive.

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR THOUGHT PATTERNS

Although we may be biologically hardwired to focus on the negative, you can retrain your brain to

embrace the language of optimism, reassures Selk. Here are some strategies to rewire.

ASK YOURSELF THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Every day, Selk recommends taking a minute to answer these three key questions:

- What have I done well in the last 24 hours?
- What is one thing I want to improve in the next 24 hours?
- What is one action step I can take to help make this improvement happen?

This exercise is so effective because it forces you to focus on what you did well, which in turn will inspire optimistic thoughts and language. "Most of the time, we can do one hundred things right during the day, but we berate ourselves about the one thing that we messed

up on," explains Selk. "This rewires your brain to focus on the positive."

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

One way to help shift your thoughts towards optimism is to simply become more aware of them, advises Hill. "Once you start to notice that your thoughts tend to be negative, challenge them in the moment and look at the flip side of a situation," she says. Instead of using or thinking the phrase "I have to," substitute it with the phrase "I get to." This way, you get a sense of opportunity and positivity instead of a sense of being coerced into a unpleasant activity.

But if you find this exercise challenging, then focus on overall mood and bodily sensations. "Once you notice these things, pause and get curious," advises Hill. "Get curious about where this feeling is coming from, the thoughts swimming around your mind, and then challenge them."

CREATE AN IDENTITY STATEMENT

An identity statement is essentially your own personal mantra that defines who you are, says Selk. It can be as simple as "I am confident, happy and healthy." Repeat it whenever your mind fills up with thoughts of worry and self-doubt. Once you've created it, "it gives you a mental advantage, because you're automatically coming from a position of strength," explains Selk. "You're carrying yourself with more confidence, and others will respond to that, as well."

FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES WITH OTHERS

When you're speaking to others, whether it's a co-worker, your partner or even your child, always make sure to begin the conversation with praise. "You want to start with something that the other person is doing well," advises Selk. Then, rather than diving in with a litany of woes, zero in on one issue you'd like to change—and offer a potential solution. "You



In conversations with co-workers, friends or family members, lead with a compliment.

don't want the conversation to devolve into what you wish the other person could do better—you want to offer a concrete action plan that will leave you both feeling empowered," says Selk.

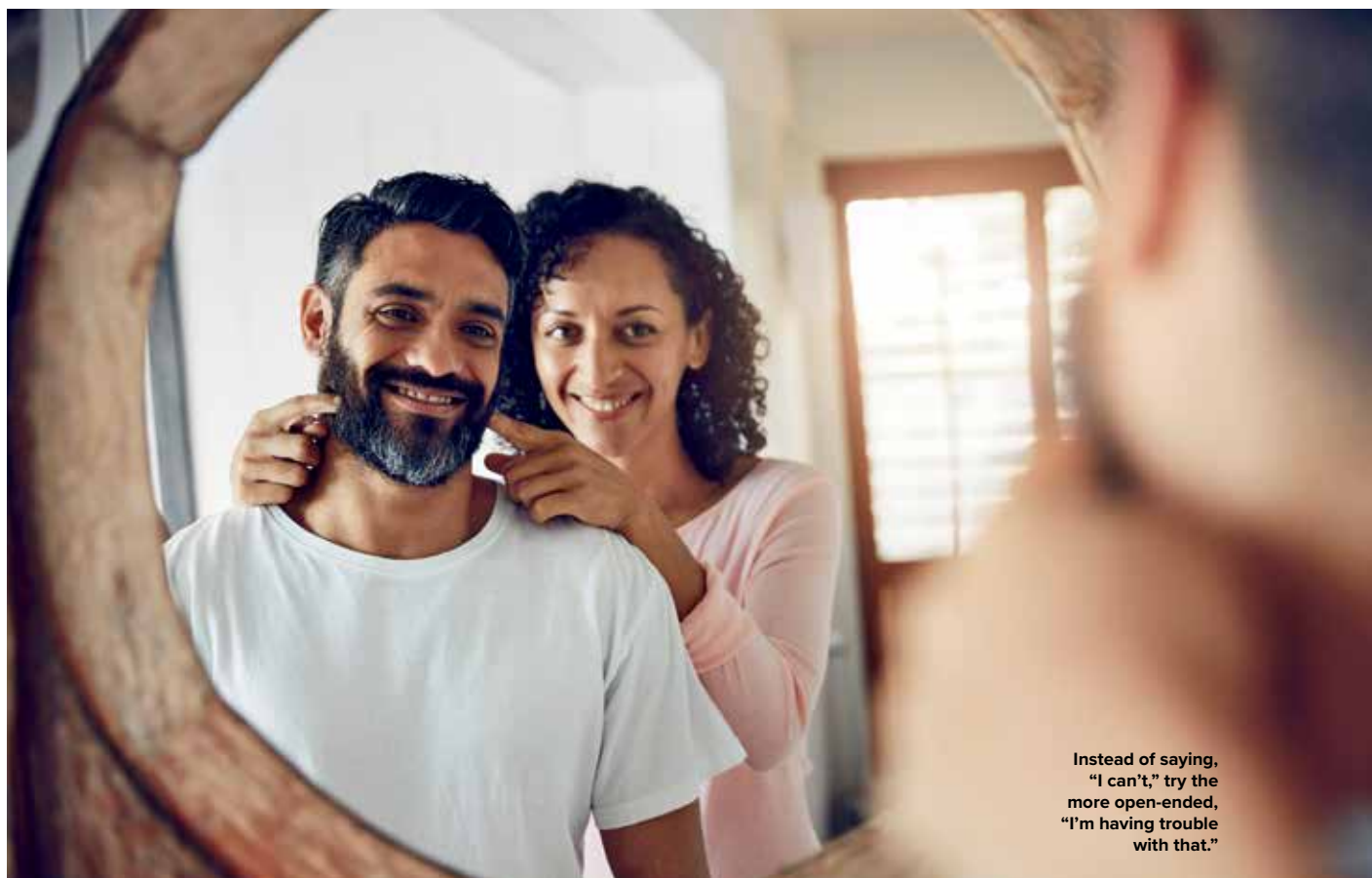
EMBRACE GRATITUDE

Gratitude itself fosters optimism, says Jennifer Herrera, a personal wellness coach in New York City. She recommends that when you wake up in the morning, you immediately think of three things you are grateful for. "This helps shift perspective and sets the tone for the day," she explains. Once you've done that, take a few minutes to visualize "feel good" words such as happiness, peace, calm, connection, focus, energy and vibrant. "It can be anything that gets you in a better state of mind," she stresses. Once you've achieved that, you'll naturally find it easier to speak the language of optimism, both to others and inside your own head.

DOWNER WORDS TO AVOID

"The words that you use in your mind have an enormous effect on your mood, emotions and even how you feel physically," says Jennifer Herrera, a wellness coach. Here are some simple tweaks to make your language less pessimistic.

- Replace "difficult" with "challenging."
- Replace "I'm feeling tired" with "I am a warrior."
- Replace "annoying" with "inconvenient" and smile when you say it, says Herrera.
- Replace "I'm not good at this" with "I'm still learning this."
- Include the word "yet." For example, instead of, "I can't solve this problem," say, "I can't solve this problem, yet." Says John Lee, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Executive Mental Health in Los Angeles: "'Yet' leaves room for growth and the permission to try and improve."



Instead of saying, "I can't," try the more open-ended, "I'm having trouble with that."